

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 179

CG 024 172

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TITLE MacMentoring: Using Technology and Counseling with At-Risk Youth.
PUB DATE 23 Feb 92
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the California Association for Counseling and Development (San Francisco, CA, February 20-23, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Counseling Effectiveness; Cross Age Teaching; Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; *School Counseling; School Counselors; Secondary School Students
IDENTIFIERS *Computer Assisted Counseling

ABSTRACT

The MacMentoring Project was designed to "hook" disenfranchised youth back into school by building self-esteem while teaching them transferable computer skills. The project was conceived with two key assumptions: adolescents have poor attendance, poor school behavior, and low self-esteem due, in part, to their poor response to previous teaching methods; and at risk adolescents have accumulated a multitude of negative experiences that have led them to feel powerless, inadequate, and unimportant. Adolescents (N=45) were randomly assigned to three groups in two school districts in northern California: one group involved in computer experiences with a school counselor; a second group involved with traditional group counseling with a school counselor; the third group not receiving any services. As the project is still under way, qualitative data are not available. These process comments and observations have been made: (1) on task behavior of the adolescents improved when they work with the computers; (2) some students ask for wordprocessing and graphics software which allows them to express creativity; (3) the nondirective counseling relationship with a computer focus has led to increased trust and self-disclosure between adolescent and counselor/graduate student; (4) when adolescents are placed with younger children they seem to display remarkably different personality characteristics; and (5) when adolescents are given increased expectations set by a younger child they seem to rise to the occasion. (ABL)

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**MACMENTORING:
USING TECHNOLOGY AND COUNSELING
WITH AT-RISK YOUTH**

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(Paper presented to the California Association for Counseling and Development Conference, February 23, 1992, San Francisco, California)

Introduction

The purpose of today's discussion is to report some preliminary data derived from an innovative study currently underway in several school districts in northern California involving technology, school counseling, and at-risk youth. The study, "The MacMentoring Project," represents a concept that is designed to "hook" disenfranchised youth back into school by building self-esteem while teaching them transferable computer skills.

Conceptual Assumptions

The MacMentoring Project was conceived with two key assumptions:

1. Adolescents have poor attendance, poor school behavior, and low self-esteem due, in part, to their poor response to previous teaching methods. Teaching methods using computers offer alternate methods, including multisensory involvement, self-paced individualized instruction, immediate feedback, learner-based locus of control and power, and covert learning (i.e., they are having too much fun to realize they are learning).
2. At risk adolescents have accumulated a multitude of negative experiences (despite often heroic efforts by excellent teachers) that have led them to feel powerless, helpless, inadequate, and unimportant. They have labeled themselves failures for what they cannot do well while often developing coping mechanisms for their "public image" which allow them to save face and divert attention away from their perceived weaknesses. Creating a cross age tutoring and mentoring environment places these same adolescents in new roles, new positions of responsibility, authority, and trust, where their expertise is valued. They are appreciated for what they can do well.

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Minimum Qualifications

Specifically, the project has invited school districts to participate that met four qualifying conditions. These districts agreed to:

1. provide sufficient Macintosh computers to allow at least a 2:1 student to computer ratio in the project;
2. have a PPS credentialed school counselor available with some technology aptitude and interest;
3. have a target at-risk population of adolescents (grades 7-9), as defined by poor school attendance, poor classroom behavior, and teacher perceived low self-esteem;
4. have an elementary school in close proximity which has access to a sufficient number of Macintosh computers;
5. have an elementary school in close proximity which has primary teachers and parents willing to match their children with visiting adolescents to learn computer skills using games.

Planning

In the summer of 1991, a new course was instituted at Sonoma State University, "Computer Applications to School Counseling." Graduates of the course, along with other technology-wise counseling graduate students, were invited to a planning meeting. Also invited to that meeting were representatives of school districts that met the aforementioned minimum qualifications. The essential elements of the project were described and implementation options were discussed by counselors, teachers, graduate students, and superintendents representing four districts. Since lack of money was apparent without grant support, an initial phase using existing resources was determined to be feasible for immediate implementation in two of the districts.

Comparison of Participating School Districts

The two participating districts shared some common characteristics. Both had computers with graphical user interfaces (GUI's) situated in lab settings, which included both Macintoshes along with PC's (with Microsoft Windows). Both districts had a high dropout rate and considered strategic early intervention with 7th, 8th, or 9th graders as appropriate. Both districts noted that the same at-risk youth who "skipped school" frequented "hangouts" in the community that offered video games such as Nintendo. And both districts had virtually no money for software, but were eager to use public domain and shareware software available from groups such as the Berkeley Macintosh User Group.

Differences in the two districts were also noted. The first district is situated in a middle class suburban community of 35,000, adjacent to Sonoma State University, with easy access to volunteers from the graduate program in school counseling. The second district is located in a lower to lower middle class, rural area of approximately 2,500, where no graduate student involvement was feasible. The first district identified ninth graders in a self-contained, "Opportunity Class," while the second district identified seventh graders scattered across several classes. In the first district, enthusiastic elementary school teachers identified a large number of first and second grade students who could potentially benefit

from the individual attention and alternate learning styles provided by the cross age computer mentoring and tutoring. In the second district, the elementary teachers expressed some reluctance to release their first and second graders for computer activities that were not overtly designed to coincide with the curriculum.

Implementation

The implementation phase of the project is currently underway. Approximately 45 adolescents are randomly assigned to three groups. One group is involved in computer experiences with a school counselor; a second group is involved with traditional group counseling with a school counselor; and a third group is not receiving any services and functions as the control. Parent permission forms have been obtained for participation in the project.

Quantitatively, the dependent variables being measured are (a) self-esteem (using pre and post-test scores on the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale); (b) school behavior (using a frequency count of office referrals); and (c) school attendance.

Qualitatively, process comments noted by counselors, counseling graduate students, teachers, aides, principals, and superintendents are being recorded from observation of the students involved in the project.

Procedurally, the first phase brought adolescents, school counselors and graduate students together to learn basic computer operations with a minimum of adult direction. Then, the students were asked to rate a variety of games as to their appropriateness for their age group. The adults were encouraged to keep a nondirective, low profile presence as support persons for technical help. In addition, the adults were instructed to provide intermittent reinforcement, making occasional, sincere positive statements to each participant at various times, e.g. "Are you sure you haven't played this before? That's a high score!" The meeting times varied by site, but they are averaged about one hour two times weekly.

The second phase brought the adolescents together with the younger first and second graders. The exact time that phase two began varied with the response of the adolescent to this option. Some students were ready to go after one or two sessions, while others preferred to wait much longer while they experimented with other software packages. Logistics were clarified, transportation arranged, and appropriate permission forms completed. High school students were given credit for Community Service hours, a requirement for graduation.

Preliminary Results of the Project

As the project is still underway, qualitative data is not yet reportable. A sampling of process comments and observations that have been noted below.

First, **on task behavior of the adolescents is remarkably improved** when they work with the computers, whether with their peer group or with the younger children. The adolescents appear to be motivated to take risks exploring new software, usually without reading any directions! They interact actively with the on screen process and, surprisingly, interact more with each other over positive experiences. They share frustrations ("How do you get this thing to do something?") and discoveries ("Look what I just did!") with their peer in a spirit of cooperative venture.

Second, some students seems to want more than "just games." They ask for, and are provided, word processing and graphics software to allow them to **express creativity** in making signs, designing greeting cards, and generating poetry.

Third, the nondirective counseling relationship, with a computer focus, has led to increased trust and self-disclosure between adolescent and counselor/graduate student at a pace set by the adolescent. As many physical education or "shop" teachers have known for years, performance driven students who are not forced to be counseled verbally will volunteer mental health issues much more freely. Many of the adolescents in the MacMentoring Project initially reacted with great resistance ("I ain't talkin' with no head shrinker--I got enough of that in the hospital I was in") but this has dramatically decreased over a brief period of time. A student designing a sign for his room, "Keep Out," led him to talk about his need for privacy with the counselor. Similarly, creating a Valentine Day card led another student to discuss her relationship with a boyfriend.

Fourth, when adolescents leave the pressure of their adolescent environment and are placed with young children, they seem to display remarkably different personality characteristics. A ninth grade boy who had achieved notoriety for his acting out behavior seemed transformed when faced with a similar first grader pushing the limits that he, the ninth grader, tried to set. Debriefing time, often in the car ride back to high school, helped the adolescent sort out their new roles and feeling association with those role expectations.

Fifth, when adolescents are given increased expectations set by a younger child, they seem to rise to the occasion. The disappointed expression of a first grader, "you didn't show up last week," creates a whole new set of feelings for a ninth grader to deal with when they are tempted to "skip school."

Perhaps the most profound qualitative data generated thus far in the projects has been the jealousy and resentment expressed by the group engaged in traditional group counseling. This group wanted to join the computer group and felt unfairly left out. (Significantly, no similar feelings were expressed by the computer group.) These complaints were registered despite the use of a highly appealing video series, "The Power of Choice," featuring Michael Pritchard. Pritchard is a professional counselor and comedian who visited the class earlier in the year. Assurances to the complaining group that the two groups could switch places in the following quarter did little to ameliorate the situation. Indeed, in the following quarter, the first computer group continued to work with the first and second graders, while the second group began introductory work with the

computer games.

Preliminary results from Project MacMentoring are encouraging. Quantitative and qualitative data continue to be collected. Implementation hurdles continue to develop, such as software and hardware availability; teacher, aide, parent, counselor, graduate student, and administrator cooperation; and return of parent permission slips. Nonetheless, the early results are encouraging.

Discussion

Public schools are under intense pressure to either improve or implode. Schools are being asked to restructure their traditional roles to better prepare their graduates for a changed world. The global marketplace has established the U.S. as a leader in information technology; students who do not complete their schooling with new basic skills, including technology and high self-esteem, will face failure in the marketplace and become parasites on their community. It is in everyone's best interest to help at-risk youth succeed through innovative approaches to curriculum and school restructuring. If the school counselor is not part of the solution, s/he is part of the problem.